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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1710397> since 2019-08-22T12:41:36Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1080/13604813.2019.1646031

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SCENES FROM AN URBAN OUTSIDE: PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF EMOTIONS, ABSENCES AND PLANETARY URBANISM

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Manuscript; final version published as:

Vanolo A. (2019), "Scenes from an urban outside: personal accounts of emotions, absences and planetary urbanism", *CITY: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, v. 23, n. 4, pp. 388-401.

Abstract

This contribution to the *Scenes & Sounds* section of CITY reflects on the experience of feeling 'outside' the urban by focusing on urban absences. The argument is developed first through theoretical speculations on planetary urbanism, emotions and absences/presences. The paper then mobilises autobiographical accounts concerning the emotions that I experienced during a summer spent in an alpine village. The paper suggests that, in my emotional sphere, the village was a 'constitutive outside' of the urban, particularly through the manipulation of feelings of distance from, and proximity to, the urban. In this sense, the paper proposes that the village was not simply a 'negative other' of the urban; rather, it may be regarded as an outside which was relationally constructed in a position of continuity with the inside: the extra-urban may include and exceed the urban, and it may emotionally perform the role of a constitutive outside

Keywords: planetary urbanism, urban/rural, presence/absence, alpine village, emotional geography

1. Introduction

This short essay develops a reflection, in between theoretical speculation and autobiography, on spaces exceeding the urban. In common language, spaces designated with expressions such as 'rural', 'country', 'mountain', 'marginal', 'wilderness', 'village' are often framed in terms of dichotomous opposition to the urban, which means that their primary feature is apparently to be 'not' or 'out of' the urban. However, it is well known to urban scholars and human geographers that urbanisation is a complex and relational phenomenon, and conceptualisations of the urban and the rural are closely bound up with each other, as discussed for example in the analyses of planetary urbanism propounded by Brenner and Schmid (see particularly Brenner 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2014, 2015). Drawing on the classic works of Lefebvre (see for example Lefebvre 1970; Soja 2000), Brenner and Schmid have developed a critique of the 'urban age' discourse and related ideologies of urbanisation (see Gleeson 2012), emphasising the need to develop alternative cognitive maps of emergent urbanising formations, and to challenge parochially defined theoretical certainties about urbanism (for similar positions, see Robinson 2011; Roy 2011; Wachsmuth 2014). A key argument is that, according to Brenner and Schmid (2014, 751), 'urbanization is a process that affects the whole territory of the world and not only isolated parts of it'. The outcomes of urbanisation processes are highly uneven and variegated: it is possible to observe forms of 'concentrated' urbanisation (the more conventional understanding of cities) and spaces of 'extended' urbanisation (the rest of the planet). However, the radical thesis proposed by the two authors is that the city is, currently, no more than an ideological construct, because even rainforests, deserts, alpine regions, polar zones and oceans are included in extensive networks of capital exploitation and, in this sense, they are urbanised (cf. Merrifield 2013; Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015).

The planetary urbanism thesis has generated a lively critical debate, particularly in this Journal (see for example Catterall 2013a, 2013b, 2014; see also Storper and Scott 2016). For example, Walker (2016, 186) declares that 'we need to pull back from the brink of totalizing urbanization to look more carefully at how cities penetrate, exploit and subsume rural areas', while Roy (2016) invites to avoid conceptual frameworks that emphasise the urbanisation of everything and to insist on the always incomplete processes of becoming urban.

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the 'outside' of the urban by focusing on its absences and on the emotional experience of urban absences, drawing on the premise that absences may be meaningful, relevant and powerful, and in this sense they can turn into sorts of presences, or absent-presences (Edensor 2005, 2008; Micieli-Voutsinas 2017). A similar position has been recently proposed in the pages of *City* by Tursić (2019) in the framework of a reflection on the concept of aesthetic space, intended as a lived experience and an imaginative play through which memories, latent reality and perceived present are conjured together, informing one another.

The reflections developed in this article mobilise two parallel narratives. On the one hand, the argument is developed theoretically, particularly by reviewing and merging ideas about planetary urbanism and the role of absences and presences in cultural and emotional geographies. On the other hand, the article mobilises biographical notes, based on my banal experience of spending a short period in a condition of relative distance from the urban (or, at least, the 'urban' in the conventional sense) and from city life. Strictly speaking, there is nothing notable in my experience as described in this paper: the use of autobiographical notes is intended as a way to use my own body as a research tool, particularly in the emotional sphere (see for example Moss 2001; Pile 2010; Punch 2012; Claid 2018; see also recent debates on visceral methodologies: Sexton et al. 2017). As I will argue, the experience of 'missing the urban'

induced me to reflect on urbanism and the ways in which I emotionally locate its insides and its outsides. Overall, this paper embraces Brenner and Schmid's invitation to try to develop new approaches, 'including experimental and speculative ones' (Brenner and Schmid 2015, 752), by seeking to pinpoint the conjunctures at which the urban is made and unmade, at least at my personal level (cf. Roy 2016).

In order to develop the argument, the paper is organised as follows. The next section will review key ideas on absences, presences and constitutive outsides, mostly by referring to contributions from cultural and emotional geographies. Section 3 discusses methodological perspectives and describes my positionality in the field. Then, Section 4 tells the story of my exploration of the urban outside, focusing on fragments of experiences and emotions. Finally, the concluding section summarises some tentative ideas and potential elements of interest for urban scholarship.

2. Absences and urban outsides

Conceptualisations of absences and presences have been particularly developed within cultural and emotional geographies. A common feature in the vast and heterogeneous literature is that absences are not simply understood as synonyms for emptiness, forgetting, vanishing and void. Rather, absence is assumed to have experiential and emotional qualities which take shape relationally, in the back and forth between absence and presence, materiality and immateriality, the inside of the individual and the external world. With this perspective in mind, it is useful not to consider absence as a 'thing', but rather as an emergent condition that is engendered by relations (Meyer 2012; Frers 2013; Meier 2013; Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018).

In order to review the variegated literature on absences in cultural geographies and urban studies, at least three different and overlapping groups of studies can be mentioned.

First, scholars have discussed how absences enacted and embodying missing objects, memories, relics or spectres seem to possess agency and cohabit with 'us' in space (Wylie 2009; DeLyser 2014), often acquiring visible form in landscapes (see for example Gibas 2013; Meier 2013; Micieli-Voutsinas 2017; Vanolo 2017; Goulding, Saren, and Pressey 2018). In this regard, Edensor (2005, 2008) used the expression 'absent presences' in order to describe the ghostly emotional effects of abandoned material structures, for example those once connected to the presence of working-class people. According to Edensor, elements such as old housing estates, old railways, and old cinemas may have sensorial, half-recognizable, and imaginary qualities, which have an indefinite status between presence and absence. In a similar vein, Scholl, Lahr-Kurten, and Redepennig (2014) deployed the expression 'present absences' to indicate how absent issues, conditions and processes may influence, constitute and/or shape spatial presences. In order to present the topic, they propose the case of the urban/rural binary, arguing that the rural is constituted by the absence of urbanity, but at the same time it is possible to detect many elements in-between presence and absence: extensive agriculture is generally absent in cities, but meat, wheat, fruit and vegetables are necessary for urban inhabitants, thus making the rural 'present-absent' in cities.

Secondly, absences have been variously mobilised by studies on material cultures and geographies of consumption. For example, Hetherington (2004), Mansvelt (2010) and Crewe (2011) have focused on the relations between objects and human subjects, arguing that memories are not simply internal processes; instead, memories extend outward into the

material environment, for example, in objects bound in a temporal flux of past, present and future. In fact, past events and their emotional tenor can be brought forward in time via encounters with objects and images (see for example Degnen 2013; Bjerregaard 2015). Hetherington (2004), working on second-hand objects, has suggested that absence can have just as much an effect on relations as recognisable forms of presence. Put differently, emotions and social relations are performed not only around what is there but also around the presence of what is not: objects, people, memories, events may end and fade away but they do not disappear because they may persist in a number of forms in space, including traces, emotional fragments, ghosts and memories (Crewe 2011; see also Degnen 2013; DeLyser 2014; Lieberman 2016; Parr, Stevenson, and Woolnough 2016; Wyatt, Tamas, and Bondi 2016).

Thirdly and finally, several authors have analysed how absences may become political objects sustaining power relations, selective narratives and various forms of control over space (Jones, Robinson, and Turner 2012; see also the studies on spectralities in urban studies: Appadurai 2000; Roy 2014; see also Beaumont 2018 on the idea of a politics of the visor). To provide an example, absence may imply exclusion, for instance by denying others' claims to spaces, places and participation, or by making them 'out of place' and inappropriate (Cresswell 1996; Ruez 2012; Nagle 2017). The absence/presence dialectic, in this sense, overlaps with visibility/invisibility, or with the familiar and the uncanny, and it is possible to mention that many forms of political activism are based on a politics of presence (see for example Phillips 1998; Purcell 2003; Brighenti 2010).¹

Overall, this diversified body of literature contends that absence and presence are reciprocally constructed. According to Law and Mol (2001, 616), 'the authority of presence depends on the alterity of Otherness. [...] the constancy of object presence depends on simultaneous absence or alterity'. Tursić (2019) in his reflection on aesthetic space presents the case of the exposition to photos of urban environments, a technique at the basis of his empirical research on aesthetic judgements. In his account, participants examined the images in order to search for aesthetic objects allowing to produce a particular type of imaginative space where what is absent (and imagined) is conjured through what is present (and believed), allowing to experience invisible aspect of reality. In this sense, I suggest assuming absence as the 'constitutive outside' of presence.

The idea of the 'constitutive outside' originates in the works of Jacques Derrida, and particularly Henry Staten's reading of Derrida (Fisker et al. 2019) has inspired Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2000), who in turn has influenced a number of scholars in urban studies (see for example Robinson 1998; Hillier 2002) among them Ananya Roy (2011, 2014, 2016). The core idea is that the outside may be necessary for the construction of a phenomenon; its function is to keep ideality from complete closure, yet it is through this very ambivalence or dialectic that positive assertion of perception is possible. This is different from traditional approaches to dialectical negation or othering. As stressed by Mouffe (2000), a real outside must be both incommensurable with the inside and in a condition of emergence from the latter. This outside calls into question the concreteness of the inside: by showing the radical undecidability of constitutive tension, the outside renders its very positivity a function of symbolising something exceeding it.

¹ To cite a very different example, post-colonial scholarship has widely argued that underdevelopment has been commonly conceived as the absence of development, giving rise to an understanding of the Global South that emphasises modes of production of absences and ultimately promotes the impossible quest for a Western idea of development (de Santos 2004; see also debates on post-development, for example Gibson-Graham 2006). A progressive conceptualisation of development hence implies recognising what is generally disqualified and made invisible or unintelligible and to consider it a serious alternative to hegemonic experiences.

Reflections on the 'constitutive outside' have been conducted in relation to both the outside of urbanity (Brenner 2014; Roy 2016) and the outside of critical urban studies (Roy 2016; Leitner and Sheppard 2016; Jazeel 2018). The debate is characterised by different positions, but all the authors raise the problem that planetary urbanisation's core idea that 'there is, in short, no longer any outside to the urban world' (Brenner and Schmid 2014, 750) may generate an urban theory 'without an outside', which reifies the city, the urban and urbanisation as objects and processes of analysis through a kind of 'methodological urbanization' which reduces the entire planet to an urban analytical gaze (Jazeel 2018). By mobilising post-colonial perspectives, several authors have stressed the need to 'provincialise' urbanisation and urban studies, for example by recognising that the city is just one result of urbanisation processes, and most of all that urbanisation might be considered just one among many processes involved in socio-spatial dialectics, some known and some not (yet) known to urban theorists (Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013; Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015; Roy 2016; Jazeel 2018).

This paper describes my personal and emotional struggle with decentring the 'cityism' of my emotional, political and cognitive experience of space and my difficult endeavour to elaborate and embody an emotional understanding of space from a position of 'constitutive outside' by embracing absence.

3. Entering the outside: positionality, autobiography and methodological remarks

In what follows, I shall describe my emotional experience of an 'outside' of my urban everyday life by reflecting on the presence-absence of various 'things', 'emotions' and 'atmospheres' which I commonly associate with my everyday practice of living the city. This may be the case with emotions generated by the absence of contact with the diverse and the unexpected, or the lack of access to 'urban' ways of life, 'urban' patterns of material and cultural consumption, 'urban' landscapes and soundscapes. On a theoretical level, it is rather easy to argue that it is difficult to think of places really untouched by urbanisation, as the planetary urbanism thesis posits. Nonetheless, the exercise proposed here starts by considering a very simple and subjective feeling, based on my specific positionality: it is relatively easy to experience spaces and atmospheres where the sensation of 'missing' the core elements of the urban is palpable, which means that the relation with absence generates an emotional presence, ultimately characterising and defining the sense of places 'outside' and 'exceeding' the urban. Put differently, the place that I am about to describe is certainly urbanised, but still my visceral experience of that place tells a different story.

The limited experience described in what follows should not in any way be considered ideal-typical or representative of wider phenomena (as for most autobiographical and autoethnographic accounts: Ellis 2003; Butz and Besio 2009). The point of an autobiographical² approach is that the self is always constituted in relation with one's context. Hence writing about my own life is a way to write about my experience of space in a way that privileges the role of

² I use the expression 'autobiography', rather than 'autoethnography' in order to emphasise the individual nature of the experiences and emotions described in this paper. Since parts of this paper describe conditions and feelings of loneliness and lack of meaningful contact with people, I decided to use an expression lacking the Greek root 'ethnos.' It should be acknowledged, however, that the boundaries between autoethnography and autobiography are uncertain (Moss 2001; Ellis 2003; Butz and Besio 2009). My autobiographical reflection is intended to enhance readers' understanding of phenomena exceeding my individual experience, and in this sense it may be considered a form of 'ethnographic I' (Ellis 2003).

emotions in writing about the urban (see Moss 2001; Punch 2012). Specifically, this short section does not follow a specific narrative; rather, some vignettes are used to describe my positionality, my feelings and the ways in which I framed and developed emotions and meanings in relation to my experience and my knowledge of the planetary urbanism debate.

Due to health problems of my young son, I decided to spend about three months in a small village in the Italian Alps characterised, in my view, by solitude, silence and lack of social contacts. Spending a period 'outside' the city was supposed to be, at that time, the right thing to do, as the city seemed to be a non-therapeutic environment for my son. I am describing this situation in order to emphasise my desire – however rational or irrational it may have been – to place ourselves explicitly 'outside' the urban, or even undertaking attempts to 'run away' from the city. I must add that the development of my acceptance and negotiation of my son's difficulties came about through contradictory tensions between the desire for isolation and distance, and the need for socialisation and disclosure. The experiences are framed in terms of the implicit and invisible quest for isolation which characterised my initial contact with my son's problems and related diagnosis, while the way I am currently writing about him pertains to a later phase, one in which I desired contact, socialisation and elaboration, including access to autobiography as a tool which is both therapeutic and makes vulnerable, as discussed by Ellis (2003). It is probably not a coincidence that I am writing these lines in a crowded urban environment. Still, I clearly feel uncomfortable in writing about some details, and hence I suppose my emotional contact with 'the village' is still partial and evolving.

The fact that there is a geographical dimension to the elaboration of pain and negotiation of the positionality of a caregiver is not new. Particularly, Giesbrecht et al. (2019) have recently analysed the spatial and emotional experiences of men caring for family members, discussing how they commonly interpret and express their emotional experiences using geographic notions of distance (feeling far or isolated) and proximity (getting closer and connected) and how men manage their emotions as caregivers by moving among physical, emotional and relational positions of contact and distance between them and their own selves, family members and the wider community. Accordingly, the choice of experiencing the 'outside' of the urban described in this paper has to be understood not only in material and geographical terms (i.e. the act of moving to an alpine village) but also in emotional ones, that is, the desire to escape from my everyday urban relations and struggles.

4. Scenes from an alpine village

We arrived at the alpine village in June.

It takes just a little more than an hour to reach the village by car from our hometown Turin. The village is almost deserted for most of the year, as it was when we arrived. It is definitely an urban artefact, made up of houses and roads (see Figure 1) and arguably invested by different forms of global flows and relations with major urban sites in the Piedmont region, such as Turin. However, day after day, in the small roads of the village, in the woods, on the banks of the local river, I started seeing the ghosts of my ordinary urban life.

Figure 1 – *A view of the village*



Photo by the author, 10 July 2017

I have spent all my life living in the city, and basically half of my life reading about cities and debates about the urban. My knowledge of the 'rural' was vague and theoretical, and emotionally unclear. I approached the idea of spending several weeks on a mountain without hesitation; to some extent, I was excited by the idea of taking a pause from daily routines and ordinary problems, as well as by the possibility that moving 'outside' of the city might accompany an emotional movement and repositioning 'outside' my daily struggles as a father and caregiver. The feeling of 'missing the city' took shape slowly, and it was an unexpected emotion to me.

My daily life in the village consisted of ordinary things: waking up, taking a walk with my son, preparing food, playing some games, taking another walk, throwing some stones into the local river, preparing more food, washing the dishes, going to sleep. Once or twice a week, we went to a bigger village by car in order to buy groceries. There was no television and the internet connection was very limited, allowing me just to send and receive emails, but little else. This daily routine was supposed to be therapeutic, hence I had a very good reason for staying there, despite the relative tedium that I soon started to perceive.

The physical and emotional distance from the urban helped me to decentre my conventional views of the urban. Things and feelings which I used to take for granted, such as noises, voices and unknown faces, faded away. Boredom was my first feeling. When I first started to describe the alpine village to a colleague, I used expressions such as 'there is nothing there.' Being a geographer, I was surprised to hear those words coming from my own mouth: of course, the concept of 'nothing', understood as absence in its purest form, is an illusion, because every remote corner of the earth is populated by organisms, phantasies, discourses, forms of economic exploitation, and so on. And it is rather easy to argue that there was much urbanity in the small alpine village (see Figure 2). However, my perception of absence was the main feeling and shaped my emotional experience of the village. In other words, in trying to describe that

place, rather than presenting and representing characteristic elements, meaningful features or other presences shaping the spirit of the place, I purposely opted for a narrative of relational absence, placing the experience 'outside' the realm of the urban, ultimately enacting an imaginative experience of the world and an imaginative play emphasising the power of the absent (Tursić 2019) and the uncanny feeling of not being 'at home' (Beaumont 2018).

Figure 2 – *Land value and the absence of the urban*



Note: the various signboards (actually four, in the picture, including the two in the background) carry the statement 'For Sale' followed by the same mobile phone number. The plot of land looks quite 'empty' and far from other houses. Given the state of the various signboards, the owner has been trying to sell the plot of land for many years. I contacted the owner: he confirmed that the plot was still for sale, but it was 'unclear' if it was possible to build on it. To my mind, the image evokes the ghost of a potential house. Photo by the author, 10 July 2017

A first element of absence that I explicitly recognised was consumerism. Critical literature in human geography has strongly criticised the idea of consumption as prerogative of urban subjects because there are a number of different and hybrid ways in which urban and rural subjects shape consumption and its meanings, as well as being themselves shaped by it (see Mansvelt 2008). Although this is certainly true, the hard fact that I experienced is that there were very limited possibilities to spend money in the village or its surroundings, apart from buying basic groceries. There was nothing like bookshops, clothes stores, hardware stores, and even advertising and brands were almost absent in this outside. Being trained as a 'critical geographer', I tend to associate a certain aura of stigma with the ephemeral pleasures of commodity consumption, and I like to imagine myself as relatively immune to the cultures and emotions of consumerism. It was therefore somewhat of a surprise for me to become aware

that I missed spaces of consumption in my everyday life. Probably as a form of reaction, I decided to buy online a frivolous object, precisely a children's book through the 'infamous' Amazon (see Timber 2015, on the supposed clash between the 'creative class' and Amazon-based forms of consumption). As expected, the book arrived in a few days and was dropped on the doormat at the entrance of our house. It materialised the ghosts of my consumeristic desires and fully demonstrated that the small village was efficiently connected with larger transnational networks of capital exploitation and planetary urbanisation. I felt both guilty and reassured: I stupidly felt empowered by the mere possibility to buy books and other amenities as if I were in the city. It was a sort of connection, possibility and aesthetic of evoking the emotional and material presence of the city, despite its physical distance, emotionally challenging the inside/outside binary.

Another example may help to describe my emotional construction of the outside. In the middle of July, I spotted on a couple of walls in the village carbon-copied leaflets advertising a local event: an aperitif party was going to be organised at a newly opened restaurant located nearby, next to a wood, in an area quite far from other houses and accessible only via an unpaved road (see Figure 3). I do not know the reasons behind the organisation of the event, but I suppose it was intended as a form of promotional activity. Being curious, I decided to take a look on the night of the event. I clearly remember a group of about six youngsters standing by an open-air bar, each with a cocktail in their hands. The bar counter was made of wood, in a typical 'alpine' design. In the background, a DJ was turning knobs on his console, producing an incredibly loud wall of synthetic sounds and electronic beats.

Figure 3 – *The aperitif party's setting, the day after*



Photo by the Author, 15 July 2017

At first sight, the setting contained all the 'presences' typically associated with the atmosphere of an urban and cosmopolitan party: cocktails, food, music, a DJ (cf. Malbon 1998). However, something immediately induced me to frame the performance as a carnivalesque version, a fiction, a mise-en-scene 'out of place' where emotions I commonly experience in the urban were absent. I am not suggesting in any way that the urban is a position of intrinsic superiority against the village, the former being the sphere of cosmopolitan knowledge and the latter a domain condemned to marginal monocultures or to mimicry when dealing with cultural production (cf. Binnie et al. 2006). The place was beautiful, the situation was friendly and the whole atmosphere of the event was arguably 'authentic.' However, if I have to consider seriously the core elements which induced me to frame the aperitif party as alien to that place, and as an emotional experience exceeding the urban, I have to try to map the absences and presences that I perceived, and to unravel various personal stereotypes. These include the absence of heterogeneity: I suppose the few people present already knew each other since long before the event. I had the sensation that strangers were unexpected and, as a matter of fact, I was a rather 'invisible' presence, a sort of ghost. Then, there was the absence of a certain 'trendy' urban aesthetic: for example, wooden benches and local flags were displayed, and I am pretty sure that nothing like them can be found in mainstream, fashionable clubs in the city. Also to be mentioned is the absence of continuity, as there has probably not been any other event like that in the recent past in that place. If, on the one hand, the DJ set confirms the simple fact that the village is imbricated in the spatialities of planetary urbanism, the contact with the 'indigenous club' did not at all generate the emotions— positive and negative, attractive and repulsive—that I typically associate with events of this kind. It was something quite different, arguably shaped to a large degree by urban absences, rather than rural presences.

The distance from the urban also had a transformative effect on me, and in this sense distance composed a sort of liminal space which destabilised my attitudes with regard to the contact with the world. After a few days of meeting almost nobody outside my home, I started dressing very badly. One day, I was too lazy to get dressed and I left home for a morning walk wearing my pyjamas. I have to stress that I did not feel depressed: day after day, life was going on smoothly. Rather, I suppose the dramatic worsening of my dressing relates to my imagination of urban life and my emotional resubjectification as a subject 'outside' the urban (or rather an 'out of place' urban subject). It did not seem to me inappropriate to wear pyjamas outside my home in that village because of the limited likelihood to meet anyone, or in an attempt to display and to communicate my identity through my body and my clothes. As a matter of fact, urban life has been famously described as a 'being together of strangers' (Young 1990), but what if there are no human strangers around? Where is planetary urbanism on the top of a mountain, in social, experiential and emotional terms? Of course, there are material, symbolic and relational traces of capitalism everywhere (see for example Figure 4), but these traces are residual, barely visual, ghostly, sorts of echoes of a distant (urban) elsewhere. They 'come' from the city and they look out of place in the village.

Figure 4 – *Traces: an empty pack of cigarettes in the woods*



Photo by the author, 18 July 2017.

The point here is that my attitude in everyday practices was partly shaped by the contact with urban emotional absences. As discussed by Frers (2013), those who experience something as absent have to fill the void that they experience through their own emotions; they have to bridge the emptiness that threatens their established expectations and practices (with implications in terms of spatial aesthetics: Tursić 2019). In my case, I did not wear pyjamas outside home for a specific reason or need (such as the need to dress in a comfortable way, although in my view, pyjamas are the most comfortable wearables ever). It simply seemed to me appropriate to wear them in this specific emotional 'outside.' This emotional attitude—a different emotional predisposition to contact with the world—embodies the ghosts of my urban gaze, the absence of the perception of the city 'looking at me' (cf. Beaumont's idea of the 'visor effect'; Beaumont 2018) and the absences which (I) materialised in the village. Much as ghosts supposedly belong to a different time, or a past long absent today, my experience of the outside was produced by giving form to spectral presences belonging to a different place. The urban was not absent; rather, it was an emotionally constitutive outside: it furnished me with coordinates in order to experience the outside as contrast, it attracted me to my inside, it allowed a renegotiation of my positionality from within and in relation to the perception of inside, and ultimately led to provincialising my imaginaries and my emotions in relation to the urban. Clearly, these associations and stories are urban(ised), yet recounted from a position of an insider outside the embodied inside or, vice versa, the perspective of an outsider inside the urban outside.

4. Concluding remarks

The reflections offered in this paper develop on two rather distinct levels. I have tried to merge theoretical understandings of planetary urbanism with reflections on my very limited experience of an urban outside. I mobilised urban studies, speculations from cultural geographies and personal anecdotes mostly connected to my emotional sphere and to my specific (auto)biography and positionality. In this sense, my account offers a contribution to recent developments in cultural geography that stress the importance of testing and developing alternative forms of writing (see for example Wylie 2010; Shaw, DeLyser, and Crang 2015). Vannini (2015), for example, described the need to emphasise the momentary, viscous, spirited, embodied, precognitive and non-discursive dimensions of spatially and temporally lived experience by building empirical narratives that 'make sense' within the world encountered. In the pages of *CITY*, Lancione and Rosa (2017) tried to shift from conventional academic writing by proposing a text, described as a dialogue and an encounter, emphasising emotions and personal strategies connected to ethnographic practices. Overall, these narratives shall underscore the situatedness, partiality, contingency and creativity of sense-making.

The feeling and emotions evoked in this paper are still intensely present. The first draft of this paper was written two years ago in the village, in a situation in which—as described—I was trying to create distance from my ordinary life, its places, its problems and its emotions. The village was sketched out as an emotional 'negative other' of the urban shaped by absences. With time, and with my emotional elaboration of my positionality as father and caregiver, my ability to think, frame and write about the alpine village and about that period—although still partial, limited and 'in becoming'—has changed. In my emotional sphere, the village does not simply stand anymore 'outside' the urban—if it ever did—but in a constructive relation, that is, a creative tension giving form to absences and presences, and ultimately to the emotional formation of these spatial formations. Ultimately, this emotional movement speaks about the always partial emotional becoming of the urban. It tells the story of a personal conjuncture where the urban is being emotionally made and unmade. In essence, the idea of planetary urbanism seems to suggest that there is no 'outside' to urbanisation, a position which raises a number of theoretical, epistemological and methodological problems (Jazeel 2018). This paper aims to contribute to the debate by stressing that the 'outside' – be it an imaginary, virtual, unreal or liminal object – is a meaningful terrain in the constitution of aesthetics, emotions and experiences of the urban. This assumption poses important methodological questions: this paper aims at contributing by stressing how autoethnography and personal stories may allow access to the outside located in-between the discrepancies of absent presences and present absences, with relevant implications in terms of construction of (self)identities, emotions and understandings of spatial aesthetics.

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